

Northern Ireland: Living With the Troubles

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A review by Dr Gordon Gillespie (QUB)



It has become fairly common with recent film and television releases to hear that you may not appreciate the end product because you are not the 'target audience'. 'Northern Ireland: Living with the Troubles', currently on display at the Imperial War Museum (IWM London) is clearly an exhibition aimed at an English audience and/or the Troubles novice rather than the veteran and, to that extent, I am not part of the 'target audience'. Nevertheless, as someone with some experience in helping create exhibitions depicting aspects of the conflict I approached this with some interest.

Northern Ireland: Living with the Troubles is spread out over five rooms (or chambers) covering 199 square metres of space (for comparison the Ulster Museum Troubles and Beyond gallery is just over 200 square metres) with 250 items on display. With a limited amount of space available the approach taken is thematic rather than chronological. Visitors are invited to explore the Troubles through the introduction and four additional sections: the night of 27-28 June 1970; the descent into violence; hell in a wee place and today and the future. The exhibition begins with a brief introductory history followed by material relating to the Troubles and a final room showing film footage of contemporary Belfast with interviewees giving their views (generally downbeat) on the current state of affairs. Many of the artifacts on display are in cases or hung on fencing similar to that used at the top of peace lines and this is quite effective in evoking something of the look and feel of the Troubles era.

The introductory material begins in 1603 and flashes through events up to the outbreak of sustained violence after August 1969. The introduction does this reasonably well but fails to give an adequate explanation of why partition occurred, sliding over the reasons (religious, political, economic) for Unionist opposition to Home Rule and Irish Independence. Equally, there is almost nothing on the period of Unionist government after 1921 to help explain the emergence of the civil rights movement in the 1960s. A few extra sentences on issues surrounding discrimination would have been helpful here.

Given the limited amount of space available the exhibition is not able to give focus to too many individual events – indeed there is a danger of the exhibition becoming something of a blur due to a fairly loose chronological approach. One of the incidents which is focused on concerns the events of the night of 27-28 June 1970 and particularly the violence on the Newtownards Road in east Belfast

known variously as The Battle of St Matthew's by republicans or Murder in Ballymacarrett by loyalists. Essentially, violence broke out in the area following a loyalist band parade with loyalist attacks on the fringe of the (Catholic) Short Strand. The original source of this violence and how and why it escalated is deeply contested as is the question of who were the main perpetrators of the violence. The Provisional IRA had prepared for a loyalist attack in advance and brought weapons into the area (subsequently leading to the deaths of two Protestant men and one Catholic man). Republicans present the events as an IRA defence of the area from a Protestant mob while unionists and loyalists see it as the IRA murder of two innocent Protestant men during a false flag operation aimed at allowing the IRA to take control of the Short Strand. The exhibition uses this event to highlight the difficulties of achieving an agreed narrative on many incidents during the Troubles, however, they might also, perhaps have consulted works such as Simon Prince and Geoffrey Warner's 'Belfast and Derry in Revolt' (which contains an excellent chapter on this event) as well as 'Lost Lives' (David McKittrick et al) for a deeper understanding.

One of the exhibition's strengths is that it does attempt to be even-handed in presenting the often conflicting views of unionists and nationalists, or perhaps more accurately, loyalists and republicans. Given that this is the IWM we should expect the focus to be on the combatants – interviews where paramilitaries explain why they joined are a strong element - but does, perhaps, go too far in that direction so that the experiences of those who were not combatants (the vast majority of people) is under-represented. In a newspaper interview lead curator Craig Murray commented: 'I was trying to cast the net as wide as I could and try to get as many voices and as wide a (selection) of ideas and opinions into the sound kiosks' (Sunday Life 27 August 2023). This is only partly successful due to the disproportionate focus on the views of combatants at the expense of non-combatants and, not least, the views of politicians.

The exhibition and the views of those interviewed thus arguably presents a view of the Troubles as the British Army versus the IRA with the UVF as an additional actor on the loyalist side (the UDA, the largest Protestant paramilitary organisation, is rarely mentioned). One of the objectives of the exhibition is to allow participants in the conflict to express their contrasting viewpoints and permit those viewing the exhibition to hear less common viewpoints rather than those of journalists and political commentators. However, this focus on combatants arguably does a disservice to the many politicians who bravely persisted in the view that, whatever differences they might hold, violence was not the answer - not to mention the many civilians who tried to continue with daily life as best possible.

There is also comparatively little on the day to day impact of violence and the threat of violence on ordinary people (unusual, given that the name of the exhibition is 'Living with the Troubles'). There are a few such images, such as a security check in Belfast city centre (the exhibition is very Belfast-centric), but more might have been useful. Images of wall murals are shown but, again, although additional information is given online, a brief explanation of the development of murals during the course of the Troubles might have provided greater context. Something more on the impact of violence on population movement and more on segregated housing would also have been welcome.



Another strong point of the exhibition is the use of a 'soundscape' as background with what appears to be the sound of rioting adding to the atmosphere - although the use of a Protestant flute band playing 'the Sash' is perhaps a little too 'on the nose' for those from Northern Ireland.

Throughout the exhibition the voices of the interviewees take the lead with images playing a supporting role. One downside to this is that the exhibition perhaps shows fewer images of violence than might be expected. Those of us who lived through, or have studied, the Troubles know that it was a horrifically violent period. Arguably, not enough of this comes across in the exhibition and the viewer needs to consult the associated online material to gain a greater awareness of the horror of the violence. Admittedly, material relating to some of the most violent events is contained in the online material which accompanies the exhibition but it might perhaps have been more effective if some of this had also been available in the museum exhibition. The viewer should perhaps come away feeling slightly shocked at how awful this period was (and thus why the peace process and Good Friday Agreement were so important) but the few still images that are used fail to fully convey this. Few of us who have had personal experiences during the Troubles or have seen film footage taken in the wake of Bloody Sunday, Bloody Friday, Omagh or other atrocities will ever forget it – surely some of this material should have been used. What we are left with is a slightly tepid version of the Troubles.



Having noted earlier that this is very much an exhibition for the newcomer I asked three visitors (in their mid-twenties) for their impressions – in general they were interested and quite impressed though they found following the course of events slightly confusing. One suggested that a few more ‘tent pole’ dates and events might have helped clarify the order in which incidents occurred.

Besides this, as Sean O’Hagan noted in *The Observer*, ‘this exhibition falls somewhere between A Beginner’s Guide to the Troubles and a conceptual installation that attempts to evoke something of the tense, uneasy atmosphere of the time.’ (*The Observer* 28 May 2023) Whether the conceptual installation element is appealing or not is a matter of individual taste.

Overall, the exhibition provides a good range of images and artifacts associated with the Troubles though more from a military or paramilitary angle. Walking through the exhibition and looking at the various items on display would probably take thirty to forty minutes.

In conclusion, IWM deserves much credit for attempting to present an issue as complicated and contested as the Troubles to a wider audience with little background knowledge (the Exhibition Glossary notes that ‘the Troubles can be a difficult conflict to untangle’). This review comes from the perspective of a writer with experience in this field and is perhaps more critical than the target audience, with no experience of the Troubles, would be. The author would, nevertheless, highly recommend that anyone who has the opportunity to see ‘Northern Ireland: Living with the Troubles’ should do so.

Dr Gordon Gillespie was a researcher, writer and academic advisor on the Linen Hall Library’s ‘Troubled Images’ project and exhibition as well as the Ulster Museum’s ‘Troubles and Beyond’ gallery. Both exhibitions are still on display.